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ABSTRACT

A keen understanding of ethnocentricity and the role it might play in classroom instruction may determine whether or not writing strategies for language-diverse learners will be effective. Research indicates that it is the attitudes of teachers toward students that most distinguishes successful teachers from unsuccessful teachers. The first critical condition for effective writing strategies for language-diverse learners is teacher ethnosensitivity. The concept of ownership, stressing writing as a means of communication between real persons, is a second critical condition for these learners. Language and cognitive processes are best thought of as cooperative and interactive processes. Thus, teachers should aid students in thinking more during writing activities. A third critical condition for language-diverse writers is establishing a classroom environment that reflects the psychosocial nature of writing, and a fourth condition is a reliance on the concept of collaboration. Since learning is a social process, interaction in peer groups is essential. Finally, a more broadly conceived condition for writing strategies for culturally diverse students involves the practice and use of writing as a tool of learning across the curriculum. In each field, the first four writing strategies should be applied if language diverse students are to maximize their potentials as writers. (Contains 20 references.) (HB)

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CRITICAL CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE WRITING STRATEGIES FOR LANGUAGE DIVERSE LEARNERS

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How does the teacher view the world? How does the teacher view ways of using language in the view of that world? How do these views affect our judgments about people? How do these views affect our judgments about an individual's intelligence? Too frequently such questions have gone unanswered and cause us to be unaware that our cultural norms tend to make us ethnocentric and therefore to make us unaware of the degree to which our beliefs that our own cultural and linguistic patterns are natural cultural and linguistic patterns cause us to measure others' behavior in these areas according to our cultural norms. Yet it is just our understanding of ethnocentricity and the role it might play in classroom instruction that may determine whether or not writing strategies for language diverse learners will be effective.

Perl and Wilson (1986) conducted a four-year study of writing teachers and it was their finding that it was the attitudes of teachers toward students that most distinguished successful teachers from unsuccessful teachers. Teachers who viewed students having little competence and being linguistically deficient were unsuccessful even when the most sound instructional methods were used. Successful teachers viewed their students as having considerable linguistic knowledge and possessing language competence, thus holding high expectations for them. In addition to linguistic knowledge, language diverse students possess cultural competence. Spradley defines culture as "the

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acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior" (1980, p. 6). Heath's study (1983) of two neighboring communities in the Piedmont area of North Carolina has shown us that the ways in which people use oral and written language are tied into other aspects characteristic of their culture. Other aspects of their culture may then differ greatly from the language practices of the school culture. **The first critical condition for effective writing strategies for language diverse learners, then, is teacher ethnosensitivity (Baugh, 1981; Williams, 1989; Farr, 1991).** Teachers need to understand and build on cultural and linguistic differences if they are to be effective with culturally diverse learners. Such an understanding should allow teachers to view students as users of language and as the main instructional task as helping the students move toward the next stage of linguistic growth.

Ethnosensitivity tends to make questions of right and wrong of lesser importance and shifts responsibility to the student. Responsibility includes making choices and in having the student establish his or her own purposes for what is to be done with language, leading to the student's perception of ownership (Applebee, 1991). Surface errors become less important and the student's purpose and intention in writing, organization, and levels of abstraction and concreteness take precedent and the student learns by doing. And in doing, the student comes to understand that writing means real communication between and among individuals. **The concept of ownership is a second critical condition for effective writing strategies for language diverse learners.** With ownership, the student's writing explores the student's experiences and opinions and writing becomes a "natural form of communication between two people who were writing and reading rather than talking" (Farr, 1991, p. 368).

Classrooms, however, may create or restrict a concept such as ownership. Therefore the nature of the classroom as a context for writing must also be considered. Many writing opportunities restrict students cognitively and socially from engaging in the writing process (Applebee, 1981; Floria and Clark, 1982). For example, much writing is done in test situations where students do not formulate their own thoughts rather than in instructional situations where thought is given primary importance. Indeed, both the format and the content of writing have many times been provided by a commercial publisher on worksheets (Dyson and Freedman, 1991). Yet what undergirds composition studies is the belief that writing is related to cognitive abilities.

Two dominant positions regarding the nature of writing to cognitive abilities are the position that cognition influences language, a position based on the work of Jean Piaget, and the position that language influences cognition, a position based on the theories of Lev Vygotsky, presently the dominant position in compositional studies. Williams (1989) suggests an alternative view: cognitive processes influence **some** aspects of language while language influences **some** cognitive processes--what he calls the interactive view of the mind-language relationship. This relationship requires an interactive, reciprocal process.

Williams questions the idea that writing is merely transcribed thought; he also questions the idea that we can generate thought merely by engaging students in the language tasks of reading and writing. Investigations of good and poor writers (Flower and Hayes, 1981; Witte, 1985) suggest that good writers spend more time thinking about what they write; poor writers focus on surface features. Williams concludes therefore that we need to help students think more during writing activities. In content areas, poor writers not only reflect a lack of mastery of the material but a lack of thought about the material. Williams speculates that the problem with poor writers is that they have been educated in an environment that does not call for reflection, an

environment that relies on rote memorization. He concludes that one of our goals should be to provide opportunities for students to practice reflection.

Williams interactive model assumes a reciprocal relationship between mind and language, avoiding the errors of assuming that good minds always produce good writing and that reading and writing per se will lead to more thought. Thus activities become part of a social context that acts on the student as the student acts on the social context through writing and sharing that writing. **Establishing a classroom environment that reflects the psychosocial nature of writing, then, is a third critical condition for effective writing strategies for language diverse learners.**

Closely related to this condition is the understanding that collaborative interaction is necessary to learning. Although in ownership students are allowed to make their own contributions to classroom tasks, Vygotsky (1978) reminds us that learning also is a social process. Yet traditionally we have used drills and exercises to train the language diverse in using standard grammar and usage, resulting in student isolation from his/her peers. Indeed, very little writing is done through such a methodology. Research, however, reflects the need for having students interact in peer groups to increase writing ability (Gere & Stevens, 1985; Healy, 1980; Moffett, 1968; Elbow, 1973; Murray, 1984; Nystrand, 1986). Indeed, students need opportunities to write and to have frequent feedback on whatever work they have in progress. **The concept of collaboration is a fourth critical condition for effective writing strategies for language diverse learners.** This concept is related to ownership in the principle of responsibility. When teachers tend to move away from implementing collaboration it is primarily due to the belief that students are incapable of handling the responsibility. Yet if we are to give our students multiple opportunities to write and to have feedback, collaboration best provides for student interaction, the production of multiple drafts of papers, and for interaction with both peers and teacher. Williams

(1989) summarizes some of the chief characteristics of collaboration as a condition with nonmainstream students as follows:

1. Frequent opportunities to practice writing.

2. A meaningful context for writing; assignments that are related to students' daily experiences and lives.

3. An emphasis on collaborative learning.

4. Frequent opportunities to combine reading and writing as reciprocal activities.

Mentioned earlier was writing that is provided by commercial publishers on worksheets and environments that rely on rote memorization. Under such conditions, students have difficulty understanding the value of writing. To understand the value of writing, students need to gain experience in a variety of meaningful, content-centered writing experiences and teachers need to become increasingly aware of how thinking, reading, and writing are linked. Challenging tasks that ask students to think, speculate, and find support for their thoughts need to become activities in every classroom. **A fifth critical condition for effective writing strategies for language diverse learners is the practice and use of writing as a tool of learning in all subjects in the curriculum, not just in English language arts.** In their book, Language Diversity and Writing Instruction, Farr and Daniels (1986) state:

> ...to do a superior job of developing young writers, we will have to enlist more than just the English and language arts teachers. We need the assistance of all subject area teachers, whose courses offer students wonderful opportunities to

> experiment with real language, audiences, rules of evidence, and other elements of the field.
>
> .....
>
> Another way of understanding this issue is to recognize that until we do begin teaching these [language diverse] students to write, they will not have received the equal educational opportunity which America claims to offer all of its children (pp. 84-85).

The concept of writing across the curriculum suggests that writing is the province as well as the responsibility of all teachers. Most importantly, the concept also views writing as a means of learning, as a means of improving students' subject-matter mastery in math, in science, in history, in all subjects. The critical conditions for effective writing strategies for language diverse learners then become applicable for teachers in all subject area classrooms, the validity of which has been reflected in the Collaborative Research Project, a unique collaboration of classroom teachers, administrators, and university professors, conducted in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. This research project combines the writing across the curriculum goal which aims to improve the quality of writing with the writing to learn goal that focuses on better thinking and learning.

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